

# The Business of Prison Phone Rates

It is cheaper to call Singapore at 12 cents a minute from your cell phone than it would be to speak to someone in prison in this country. A typical interstate collect call from a prison has a \$3.95 connection fee (regardless of the length of the call), while rates per minute can be as high as \$0.89 per minute. This can result in charges of \$10-17 for a 15-minute collect call or \$300 per month for a weekly one-hour call.

These high rates are the result of the contracts between prisons and the telephone companies that offer secure telephone service for prisoners. These contracts impose exorbitant commissions on telephone companies, which are passed on to prisoners' families in the form of high rates for collect calls or pre-paid/debit accounts.

The phone market in state prison systems is worth more than an estimated \$362 million annually in gross revenues. Commission payments to governments in return for exclusive phone contracts account for an estimated 42 percent nationwide, or \$152 million per year, according to a 2011 report by Prison Legal News.

Expert commissions have found that excessively high prison phone rates severely and negatively

impact violence in prisons, recidivism, and access to counsel. They also place an unfair financial burden on prisoners' families and loved ones. In 2005, the American Bar Association adopted a resolution urging the "lowest possible rates," among other measures designed to afford prison and jail inmates reasonable opportunity to maintain contact with the free community. The American Correctional Association has stated that prisoners "should have access to a range of reasonably priced telecommunications services" with rates "commensurate with those charged to the general public."

Civil rights leaders, media reform advocates and criminal justice activists are working together to urge the FCC to address long distance rates, as well as set the stage for state action on local rates. A petition pending at the Federal Communications Commission since 2003 seeks a cap on long distance rates, elimination of per-call charges, and guaranteed access to debit calling. The FCC's grant of this petition would immediately impact long distance prison rates and would provide a strong impetus to the 42 states that have not yet acted to remedy their own local prison telephone rates.

## For More Information:

Prison Phone Rates Campaign, <http://phonejustice.org/>

Media Justice Fund of the Funding Exchange, "Criminal Charges: Excessive Prison Phone Rates Take a Toll on Innocent Families," April 29, 2009. <https://org2.democracyinaction.org/o/6587/images/MJFPrisonPhones-fnal.pdf>

Prison Legal News, "Nationwide PLN Survey Examines Prison Phone Contracts, Kickbacks," April 2011. <https://org2.democracyinaction.org/o/6587/images/Prison%20Legal%20News%20Prison%20Phone%20Call%20Report%20April%202011.pdf>

American Bar Association detailed legal memo supporting its 2005 resolution favoring the lowest possible rates for prisoners. [http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publishing/criminal\\_justice\\_section\\_newsletter/crim-just\\_policy\\_am05115b.authcheckdam.pdf](http://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/publishing/criminal_justice_section_newsletter/crim-just_policy_am05115b.authcheckdam.pdf)

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## The Prison Phone Rates Collaborative is a project of:

Asian American Justice Center | Center for Media Justice | Consumers Union | Free Press

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights | Media and Democracy Coalition

NAACP | National Council of La Raza | National Hispanic Media Coalition | National Urban League

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